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UIS tops in state in computer science grad students

By **CHRIS DETTRO****THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER**

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With an enrollment of just less than 5,000, the University of Illinois Springfield doesn't come to mind when you think biggest in the state.

But the UIS Computer Science Department is big. It has more graduate students enrolled in its master's program than any other public university in Illinois, including the U of I flagship university in Champaign-Urbana, which has more than eight times as many total students.

Ted Mims, chairman of the UIS department, says the master's program is popular because the curriculum is flexible and offers students the opportunity to select classes that will help them achieve their career goals.

A graduate research seminar is the only required course in the curriculum, he said.

"We also offer a degree online," Mims said. "When we moved online, it opened up more opportunities."

According to the Illinois Board of Higher Education, UIS had 184 students seeking a computer science master's degree in 2009, the last year for which figures were available. Northern Illinois University had the second-most with 178.

UIS, with a total of 195 students, ranked fifth among state schools in 2009 when it comes to the number of undergraduate students majoring in computer science. UIUC topped the list with 682 undergraduate majors.

When he came to UIS 18 years ago, Mims said, it had 75 undergraduate students and 45 graduate students in computer science.

Innovative curriculum

Sheldon Linker and his wife have their own computer consulting company in Irvine, Calif. Linker says its main business right now is "fixing big projects that have gotten into trouble."

He graduated from the UIS master's program in computer science three years ago as an online student. He now is pursuing his PhD — again online — from Auburn University.

"We looked for the most respected college in the computer science area that had a distance learning program" when he chose UIS, Linker said.

He said he has "no complaints at all" about his two years in the UIS master's program. "I met a bunch of people associated with the university online that I'm still friends with."

Mims said the computer science faculty has developed "an innovative curriculum that allows the department to offer classes on cutting-edge topics in a timely manner."

The classes are offered in both on-campus and online formats, which allow students the flexibility to take two classes that might normally be offered at the same time if they were offered only on campus.

"The master's degree is valued by employers, and often they pay the tuition for students to complete their degree," Mims said. Internship programs also are available.

"We have former students working at State Farm, at Microsoft and in the military," he said. Two pilots who were graduates of the U.S. Air Force Academy were UIS grad students.

Convenience cited

For Cindy Lord, a current grad student who works at Bunn-O-Matic in Springfield, UIS made it easier.

Lord is about halfway through the master's program and plans to get her degree at the end of the 2012 school year. She holds an undergraduate degree from UIUC.

"For me it was the convenience," she said. "It's a school close to home, and I can take either on-campus or online classes. That works well with my career right now."

Linker admitted that other factors weighed in his choice of UIS.

It didn't hurt that his wife's parents both graduated from UIUC.

Linker also had planned his PhD project to be something akin to HAL 9000, the artificial intelligence computer in the fictional film "2001: A Space Odyssey."

"The fact that HAL was a product of the University of Illinois didn't hurt, either," he said. "We thought it was pretty funny."

2009 computer science master's degree students

U of I Springfield 184
 Northern Illinois University 178
 U of I at Chicago 143
 U of I at Urbana-Champaign 133
 Western Illinois University 99
 Illinois State University 98
 Southern Illinois University Carbondale 63
 Southern Illinois University Edwardsville 46

2009 Undergraduate computer science majors

U of I at Urbana-Champaign 682
 Illinois State University 472
 Southern Illinois University Carbondale 397
 U of I at Chicago 350
 U of I Springfield 195
 Southern Illinois University Edwardsville 171
 Western Illinois University 162
 Northern Illinois University 133
 Eastern Illinois University 108

Source: Illinois Board of Higher Education

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